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Bataille and Nietzsche: The Immortality of Ecstasy

ALISON FREEMAN

Georges Bataille and Friedrich Nietzsche believed in ecstasy, in wild liberation, in the uselessness of society's dictations, and in disappointment. Though they were writing nearly one hundred years apart, their philosophical theories and desires are remarkably alike. By comparing these two theorists, I show the similarities and differences, their the grand failures and the liberating successes.

Similarities in Philosophies

Both felt deeply that their lives were more than they seemed – Bataille that the fleeting moments of ecstasy were only a glimpse of how life was truly meant to be and Nietzsche that ecstasy was constantly lurking beneath the surface, waiting to be discovered and gloried in. Ecstasy, the elusive, overpowering joyfulness, is what they were both searching for, though they called it by different names. Anything that provoked such strong feelings and had the potential for losing oneself entirely, even if only for a moment, qualified as ecstasy.

For Bataille, it was raw ecstasy, driven by intense sexual pleasure, religious dementia, or sadistic cruelty. Bataille may have wanted to suspend himself in this state forever, but he knew that he was unable to do so. Nietzsche believed that joy could be derived from Dionysian liberation – the wild, dark, silent passion of abandoning what one thinks one should do and obeying one's desires. Displacing communication and "morals," this state could be obtained by laughter, also a form of letting go. He, too, knew that he could not stay in this state forever.

Bataille wanted to defy social norms, to live exactly as he felt would satisfy him. In doing this, he intentionally set out to "enjoy" things that he knew that the majority of the population considered wrong. The thrill in defying society seemed to outweigh the actual pleasure derived from the event. Bataille himself describes an orgy that he participated in:

The one I was at (took part in) last night was as crude as you might imagine,
I followed the example of the worst, out of simplicity. In the middle of an

uproar, of falling bodies, I'm silent and affectionate, not hostile. To me, the sight's horrible (but more horrible still are the rationalizations and tricks people resort to to protect themselves from such disgusting things, to distance themselves from their inevitable needs) (1961, 13).

The fact that something was shocking seemed to be the qualifying factor for Bataille to enjoy it. He wanted to break away from traditions and define his own way of living, but all he could only was by denigrate those very traditions; he did not create his own. And always, no matter what height of ecstasy Bataille achieved, there was always a return to the abyss of guilt. Nonetheless Bataille was disgusted by those who were not honest with themselves. He thought that the orgy was "horrible" but not nearly as horrible as the people who would judge that it was disgusting and not admit that they really wanted to try it themselves.

Nietzsche similarly valued self-honesty. He hated pretenses; people should act as they feel is right, not simply do what someone tells them to. He did not even want his followers to follow him if they were not honestly excited by their thoughts. Echoes were useless to him – he wanted only real thoughts. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche says:

Why make a principle of what you yourselves are and must be? – The truth of it is, however, quite different: while you rapturously pose as delivering the canon of your laws from nature, you want something quite the reverse of that, you strange actors and self-deceivers! (1990, 476).

The evil of self-deception was that you can fool all of the people all of the time, but where would that leave you? Accepting who you are and using this to the best of your ability is a much more enticing than conforming to society's mold. While society may say, "This is the way to lead a good and happy life," only your Dionysian instincts will truly bring happiness.

Losing Oneself

Both Bataille and Nietzsche wanted to lose themselves. Their methods differed slightly; Bataille wanted to get out of himself in ecstasy. – getting up and away, before being plunged back down into guilt. Nietzsche wanted to go into the dark, silent Dionysian passion which may also lead into the faults of communication. Nietzsche wanted to get away from the self that others thought he should be and glory in the self that he knew existed.

Bataille's steps of the "Cycle of Swimming Through Time" (1961, 92) exemplify the steps of leaving and returning to oneself. The steps are:

- a1) real concerns;
- a2) action (productive expense of energy);
- a3) rest;

b1) anguish;

b2) partial, explosive loss of self . . . (unproductive expenditure, religious dementia, but categories of religion and action intermixed — eroticism is something else — laughter reaches divine innocence . . .);

b3) rest, etc.

This is a very confusing cycle because the steps do not appear progressive. However, I believe that the cycle is continuous and perpetual, starting at *a1* and returning to it. In part *b* the steps of the cycle seem elevated. The steps in part *a* of the cycle is more external while the part *b* turns inward. To show how this cycle works, I use religious dementia, one of Bataille's methods for achieving ecstasy, and follow it through these six steps.

a1) The real concern is be the fear of sinning, of knowing that you are a sinner, and the fear of eternal punishment because of that inescapable fact.

a2) The real action could be taken in a church or in any sort of religious community that expresses the same concerns. The action is searching for and trying solutions that may move one toward salvation.

a3) The rest may represent a gathering of strength in silence and stillness, where action is no longer being taken but anguish has not yet infiltrated.

b1) The anguish is the knowledge that you are not saved (the indirect feeling that you cannot do anything to help yourself) and that you cannot save yourself or anyone that you love.

b2) The "unproductive expenditure [of energy]" is the useless, fanatical, joyous letting go of anguish and fears in the throes of dementia.

b3) The second rest may be another gathering of strength; basking in the glory of the recent ecstasy and preparing for the onslaught of another cycle. The self is returned to and eventually a new real concern will emerge.

Bataille himself believed that religious ecstasy was just as powerful as sexual ecstasy, saying:

Whatever the religious tradition from which mystical trance is derived, it exhausts itself by exceeding being. Taken at a fever pitch, the fire within relentlessly consumes whatever gives people and things their stable appearance — whatever gives them confidence, whatever acts as a support. Little by little, desire lifts the mystic to such utter ruin and expenditure that the life of that person becomes more or less a solar brightness (Bataille 1992, 31).

The anguish that the religious believer experiences consumes the concerns and the actions and explodes in religious fervor and ecstasy. This state, however, cannot be maintained, and eventually the ecstasy fades and is lost in the face of yet another real concern.

That this is a cycle demonstrates that ceaseless ecstasy. Cycles are perpetual; the constant rise and fall represents the anguish and the ecstasy. The cycle moves from

the external to the internal; anguish is an impotent emotion without real resolution. Anguish creates paralyzing inaction; action occurs first but fails to hold back the anguish. Nothing can take away the anguish; the individual has to let it go but eventually, inevitably it returns.

Bataille also said:

Chance is an effect of gambling. This effect can never come to rest. Wagered again and again, chance is a *misunderstanding* of anguish (to the extent that anguish is a desire for rest, for satisfaction). This impulse leads to the only real end of anguish – the absence of an answer. It's an impulse that can never overcome anguish, for in order to be chance and nothing other than chance, the movement of chance has to *desire* that anguish will subsist and chance remain wagered (1961, 75).

Anguish can never truly be overcome, although it can be assuaged with temporary rest. Chance, the force which bounces life from one incident to another, is nothing more than an indirect means of different occurrences.

Nietzsche had a different method of letting go. He believed that people created the world because they had no way of dealing with their lives if their creation was nothing but a disorganized accident. The rules and structures of this logic were personal; they depended on what each individual created to explain him or herself. To let go, all you had to do was abandon those rules, accept the disorganized accident, and live exactly as you want to.

Nietzsche draws a parallel to scientists who, in the mid 1880s, were rather suspicious of the “modern” technology that they did not understand. The world these scientists had created did not extend to the new ideas and, therefore, the new ideas did not exist. Although regression to the science of an earlier time is not necessarily the right idea, the fact that they wanted to get away from what people were telling them to believe is important. Nietzsche saw this as a step toward intellectual liberation; the denial of echoing and the escape from dependence on the dictates of society.

In this, it seems to me, we ought to acknowledge that these skeptical anti-realists and knowledge-microscopists of today are in the right: the instinct which makes them recoil from the *modern* reality stands unrefuted – what do we care about the retrograde bypaths they choose! The essential thing about them is *not* that they want to go “back,” but that they want to – get *away*. A little strength, soaring, courage, artistic power *more*, and they would want to go *up and away* – and not back! (Nietzsche 1990, 41).

Nietzsche wants to go forward (up and away!) fearlessly and enjoy what is ahead to the fullest. He does not like the scientists who are trapped in their personal limita-

tions. There is no point in looking back on what has already been done, but there is also no need to hop on the “modern” bandwagon simply because it is there. The goal instead is to get away—not where someone tells you that you should be, but rather where you want to fly to. Looking back and to others is futile.

Another expression of stark honesty can be found in both Bataille’s and Nietzsche’s views of the flaws in human nature. Even though Nietzsche believed that people imagined their own worlds, no one imagines themselves as perfect if they do not match the “morals” of society. Nietzsche disapproved of anyone who thought that they were fooling the world into thinking that they were something better than what they really were. He was extremely scornful of people who wanted to make others think that they had a personal revelation and felt the need to return to nature and live according to nature’s rules, pure and undemanding. He said,

You want to live ‘according to nature?’ O you noble Stoics, what fraudulent words! Think of a being such as nature is, prodigal beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without aims or intentions, without mercy or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain . . . To live—is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is living not valuating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different? (Nietzsche 1990, 39).

Such people are not thinking for themselves—they are only echoing what they think are worthy ambitions. They are denying how they really think and feel, and saying, parrot-like, what the world would like to hear. If someone was truly satisfied by returning to nature, he or she would have every right to glory in the new experiences. However, as Nietzsche pointed out, such a person would not make false, superficial claims. The obvious contradictions imply a lack of thought—which indicates a lack of individuality and sincerity.

Bataille also disapproves of this intellectual and emotional dishonesty. He wants to glorify the cracks in human nature. If your personal nature is satisfied by an orgy, then by all means indulge yourself. If not, find the thing that will satisfy you (transport you to a fleeting moment of ecstasy), and, if the common majority do not approve, do it anyway. The worst mistake would be to deny that you ever had the urge or the desire to commit a societal “crime.”

Denying yourself would be the worst thing that you could do. Instead of being satisfied, you may find yourself lying awake in frustration because you are intent on covering over the cracks in your nature. Bataille knows that the cracks in your nature will be there regardless of what covering you put over them, like a poorly patched hole in the roof. Continuing to repair the roof still won’t fix the leak. Instead Bataille would say leave it alone, let the sun shine in and the rain too. At least you would be alive and able to feel it.

Morals, and a Lack Thereof

Neither Bataille nor Nietzsche were very fond of society's morality. Bataille thought that one should compose one's own set of morals, because only by listening to yourself could you know how you were supposed to live. Listening and responding to the traditional morals set by religion or society would be as bad as denying yourself the sort of pleasure that satisfied you most simply because it was considered "wrong". If you lived according to your own morals, you would constantly be searching for what felt right and what was worth pursuing. This might not be relaxing or mindless, as others' morals are, but it would be living as you thought you should.

Make no mistake. The morality you hear—which is the one I'm teaching—is the most difficult. It won't let you attain either sleep or satisfaction . . . What I ask of you is hell's purity. Or if you will, a child's. This purity won't include a promise of reciprocity, and you won't be bound by obligation. *Coming from yourself* you'll hear a voice leading you to your fate. It's the voice of desire, not desirable *persons* (Bataille 1961, 160).

Bataille's reasoning also explained why he was so overwhelmed with guilt. The "guilt" that accompanied existence was, for him, inescapable. That was why he sought ecstasy—to lift him up and out of himself—so that he did not need to think of his own morals and did not need to dwell on his decisions. Bataille did not want to be in control. Instead, he wanted to rise up on the wave of ecstasy and let it carry him where it would. He knew, too, that this wave would inevitably come crashing down and this added to his despair. However, he still believed that he could achieve ecstasy, despite the fact that he derived it from external factors.

Nietzsche also believed that ecstasy could only come from oneself. He had little use for morals in general since he thought that they were an invention of the weak. A weak, useless person will cry out that it is wrong for someone to hit him and take his money and that society or God will surely punish him for his actions. If the weak man was a strong man who hit other people and took their money, he would have no need for morals himself, and therefore, they would not exist for him. Morals are made in self-defense, and perhaps, protect those who cannot protect themselves.

However, Nietzsche still believed that if people took full responsibility for themselves, accepted their strengths and weaknesses and not blame any shortcomings or deficiencies on anyone but themselves, then morals would not exist. Nietzsche said, "Morality now led nowhere. This realization could drive one to anguish, ecstasy, madness or dereliction, yet it constituted the supreme moral experience, 'the disarming freedom of meaninglessness and an empty glory' " (cited in Bataille 1992, x).

This realization could be related to the moment of loss of self in Bataille's Cycle of Time. Affecting everyone in different ways, this ecstasy would change lives forever. Some would succumb to perpetual anguish and never be able to change their lives or their feelings. The strong would achieve this ecstasy and live with it. (But this is

impossible, people create the world they live in and this creation includes morals, abandoning them is as impossible as abandoning the world.)

Madness and dereliction are choices of the weak, but everyone would experience the amazing freedom that comes with the loss of all morals and responsibilities. Once people realize that they are actually in control and that there is nothing left to control. This loss of control can also be termed "letting go" which returns again and again to ecstasy. If you cannot control it, you may as well do your best to enjoy it. If you have no way of influencing the outcome, you may as well try to satisfy yourself. If you cannot touch the steering wheel, you may as well enjoy the ride.

Nietzsche also said, "Morality simply is weariness" (cited in Bataille 1992, 30). When there is no one stronger than everyone else, there is no one to keep everyone in line. Therefore, threats of physical and eternal punishment keep everyone from living as Nietzsche thinks they should. For if everyone did exactly as they wanted to because they had nothing to lose, a chaotic society would emerge. Such a society could not last as the fighting from such chaos would grow tiresome. Morals would have to be invented so that society could rest.

Language and Its Repercussions

Bataille and Nietzsche recognize language as a necessary evil. Once something has been spoken, it becomes defined and is no longer an escape from the self. This limits the ecstasy, which thrives on boundlessness. There are no words past a certain point; be it sexual pleasure, religious dementia, or a fascination with cruelty. Thoughts and feelings can be expressed simply by knowing the other person, not through words that could easily be interpreted in countless different ways. However, communication like this is only possible on rare, intense occasions. Therefore, it is impractical for everyday use. Consequently, people need a common, understandable, language.

Bataille thinks that communication is inherently evil because the purest form of communication – prayer – only occurred at the crucifixion. The only way that God could talk to his people, to actually get their attention so that they listened to Him, was through great suffering. Communication in its purest form is corrupt, therefore every other form of communication degenerates from there. Bataille said:

In the elevation upon a cross, humankind attains a summit of evil. But it's exactly from having attained it that humanity ceases being separate from God. So clearly the "communication" of human beings is guaranteed by evil. Without evil, human existence would turn upon itself, would be enclosed as a zone of independence. And indeed an absence of "communication"—empty loneliness—would certainly be the greater evil (1992, 18).

Communication cannot help but go along with sexual pleasure and ecstasy—it is the communication of two bodies as opposed to the unsatisfactory satisfaction of one body with itself. Life without communication would be devoid of meaning, one

would have to live in a vacuum. But a life that contains communication must also contain suffering. This suffering must be part of life; it is the anguish that leads to the loss of self.

When two people communicate, they are leaving themselves vulnerable to misunderstandings as well as risking their very individuality. Bataille sees communication as a brave step toward uniting two people (other than sexually); but it cannot operate unless the two are willing to take the ultimate risk.

[communication] requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is risked, placed at the limit of death and nothingness; the moral summit is the moment of risk taking . . . being suspended in the beyond of oneself, at the limit of nothingness" (Bataille 1992, 18).

This moment of risk taking, being poised at the brink of nothingness and staring into the abyss, could also be a moment of ecstasy.

Nietzsche believed that language is necessary, though inadequate. To truly express oneself, a person must find his/her ecstasy in dark Dionysian passion. This ecstasy is personal and completely understood until it is spoken. Once categories cease, enjoyment begins. This is also reflected in his arguments against self-deception. Once you drop your pretenses and stop repeating words that other people have said, then you begin to express yourself. Ecstasy may be the same for some people, but once it is defined and put into words, it may no longer be recognizable.

One creates one's world. Nietzsche said, "One should not understand the compulsion to construct concepts, species, forms, purposes, laws ('a world of identical cases') as if they enabled us to fix the *real world*; but as a compulsion to arrange a world for ourselves in which our existence is made possible" (Nehamas 1985, 95). Life would be intolerable if we did not make it tolerable, and languages is one of the devices we use to do so. Without language, we would have no way of expressing what we think is the right way to live and, therefore, would have no way of knowing what to do.

Nietzsche accepted this as a way of life, but does not want people to think that they are truly communicating. Just because they impose their own standards upon the world, to make it more tolerable to them, does not mean that they are in any way representing the real world. As long as the line between what is real and what people think is real remains clear, language is acceptable.

Human Nature

Bataille and Nietzsche believed in accepting their nature as it was; reveling in the flaws and rejoicing in the blessings. However, Nietzsche seemed much more cheerful with regard to his life in general, while Bataille seemed to swing from ecstasy to depression with little provocation. Nietzsche had faith that he could get back to his ecstasy, while Bataille merely yearned for more ecstasy all of the time—rather like an addict who cannot control his cravings.

Bataille depended on external forces to drive him to ecstasy, whether it was a woman, religious faith, or cruelty. He admitted, "I enter ecstasy looking for the manifest or obvious, for a nature that isn't arguable and is given in advance. . . . What might finally be the object of my knowing answers the question of my anguish" (Bataille 1961, 75). He was searching for the answers to his ecstasy outside of himself because he could not supply them. This limitation meant that he needed to communicate, with someone or something, to achieve this ecstasy, and there were inherent faults in communication.

Perhaps that is why he was depressed so often; when the stimulus was removed, he had no way of carrying over the ecstasy and had to wait until he could find another. He felt out of time and place and, therefore, wanted to leave himself as often as possible. He expressed these sentiments, saying:

Each being is given a place in the world's arrangement (animal instinct and human customs) and each uses time in the appropriate mode. Not me, though—'my' time is normally a gaping wound, it gapes for me like a wound. Sometimes incapable of doing anything, sometimes rushing around—ignorant about where work begins, where it ends. Anxious, panicky, confused: unfocused. And yet, *I know better*. The anguish, though, is latent in me, and it flows out in the form of feverishness, impatience, and avarice (the stupid fear of *wasting* my time) (Bataille 1961, 97).

This again shows Bataille's cycle and why he knows and fears the loss of ecstasy and the return of reality/guilt. Even when he is in ecstasy, he knows that the anguish is waiting for the moment he returns, to attack and drain him. Though he may view death as the ultimate, total communication, Bataille does not really want to die. He wants to live and experience all that he can, the sin lies in the wasting time. Time that could be used for thinking, discovering, loving or countless other productive things is lost forever once it is killed by confusion or a lack of focus.

Nietzsche seemed more content with his nature than Bataille. He knew that, without any particular effort or external force, there was a Dionysian satisfaction waiting for him. He could reach it without working, or suffering, or feeling "guilty". This gives Nietzsche his air of security that Bataille never seemed to possess. Nietzsche stated, "I can't recall efforts, there's no trace of struggle in my life, and I'm the opposite of heroic natures. My experience knows nothing at all about what it means to 'will' a thing or work at it ambitiously or relate it to some 'goal' or realization or desire" (cited in Bataille 1992, 35).

He is happy with his nature and does not feel threatened by the passage of time. His ecstasy seems to possess a timelessness that permits him to enjoy it at will. However, he too knows that he cannot be suspended in ecstasy forever. As he spoke through Zarathustra, "You higher Man, learn this, learn that joy wants eternity, joy wants the eternity of all things, *wants deep, deep, deep eternity!*" (Nietzsche 1961, 332). Nietzsche

knows that he cannot maintain it forever, and comes crashing down with Bataille.

Nietzsche also believed in the power of sexual pleasure. He did not consider it a sin, because that was the morality of a weak society. Like Bataille, he thought that if it made two people intensely happy, it was worthwhile. Man himself had imposed the taboo upon sexual activity, which Nietzsche did not understand.

"Christianity gave Eros a poison to drink—he did not die of it, to be sure, but degenerated into vice" (Nietzsche 1990, 494). Society labeled an enjoyable behavior as wrong, and everyone had to suffer as a result. Everyone was taught that their enjoyment of sex was a flaw in their nature and should be denied. This is a good evidence for Nietzsche's argument that morals were created for the convenience of a few.

Both Bataille and Nietzsche love laughter. Bataille finds escape in laughter, he said, "If the laughter is violent enough, there'll be no limiting it" (Bataille 1961, 17). He found that laughter could act as a stepping-stone to ecstasy, it could join two people in contact. Laughter is communication that cannot be tainted, because there are no words to confuse or debase it.

Nietzsche finds wisdom in laughter; it is learning to let go. He spoke through Zarathustra,

So learn to laugh beyond yourselves! Lift up your hearts, you fine dancers, high! higher! and do not forget to laugh well! This laughter's crown, this rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, do I throw this crown! I have canonized laughter; you Higher Men, learn—to laugh!" (Nietzsche 1961, 306).

His goal, as always, was to learn to love what you have, and when you are brave enough to laugh, you are brave enough to enjoy living.

I have compared the philosophies of Bataille and Nietzsche in terms of their overall approach, their ideas concerning time, morals, language, and human nature. Their analyses are very similar; each strives for ecstasy, satisfaction, and completion in every way possible. Both had very clear ideas about what would make them happy and neither one cared for what society thought, except perhaps Bataille when he wanted to shock people. Bataille, the tortured and ecstatic, found solace in Nietzsche, the strong, isolated, and happy.

"He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And then when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes at you" (Nietzsche 1990, 493).

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